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FAITH IN THE FANDOM: FINDING MEANING AND IDENTITY IN WORKS OF  
SCIENCE FICTION

by

LAUREN COOPER

Under the Direction of Brett Esaki, PhD

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the ways that works of science fiction are being used to provide tools for negotiating contemporary, modern life and defining identity. The primary method of research for this project is a series of interviews conducted with participants attending a public science fiction and fantasy convention, called Dragon Con in Atlanta, GA. The interviews include questions about the impact of science fiction on entertainment, identity, and community. Incorporating the model of the “fan object” into the way religious studies scholars interpret religion provides insight on a new example of religious individualism that seems to be one new step in the evolution of religion.

INDEX WORDS: Science fiction, Dragon Con, Identity, Meaning, Religion, Fandom, Fan object

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SCIENCE FICTION

by

LAUREN COOPER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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2016

FAITH IN THE FANDOM: FINDING MEANING AND IDENTITY IN WORKS OF  
SCIENCE FICTION

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to the people of Dragon Con and to science fiction fans everywhere.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

It is with immense gratitude that I would like to acknowledge Dr. Brett Esaki for his constant encouragement and guidance throughout the writing process. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Molly Bassett and Dr. David Bell, without whom this thesis would not have been possible. I would also like to acknowledge Dan Carrol with Dragon Con Media Relations for his help with obtaining media access to Dragon Con 2015. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my friends and family for patiently listening to me go over my ideas countless times. Finally, I would like to thank the Department of Religious Studies at Georgia State University for allowing me to pursue a project that is close to my heart.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

“It’s got this very much, like a tradition feel to it. Without having all of my badges in front of me, I can’t even remember how long I’ve been coming, just that I’ve been coming as long as I can remember. And so it has this really like special holiday feel to it.”<sup>1</sup>

The above is a quote from David, a twenty-nine year old high school teacher, describing Dragon Con, a large science-fiction and fantasy convention held annually in Atlanta, Georgia. I met with David on the second day of the convention and I asked him to discuss some works of science fiction he found compelling. Over the course of our interview, David discussed many of his favorite works of sci-fi. The examples he gave were seemingly unrelated (besides being loosely grouped in the same genre), yet David listed them as if it made perfect sense to include them in the same group, as if these examples were all pieces of a very obvious puzzle. He started with *Star Trek*, which he described as an important part of his childhood, and quickly moved through some his favorite video games, *anime*, and novels. Then, he finished off with a brief explanation of how he merges his classwork with his personal interests by making his students read articles about science fiction topics. It is safe to say that David is firmly planted within science fiction fan culture.

The initial intention of this research was to examine how individuals, like David, at Dragon Con, a large science fiction and fantasy convention, are using works of science fiction to fulfill a religious function in a way that had not been previously addressed. When I asked David to elaborate on his answers and tell me why he chose specific things, he explained how each example represented an idea that was important to him. These works helped him to identify his personal values and construct his identity. David did not identify himself as religious, and he certainly did not declare science fiction to be his religion. At Dragon Con I met several

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<sup>1</sup>David, personal communication, September 5, 2015.

individuals who shared David's love for science fiction, and like David, they used elements of sci-fi to create values and meaning, functions that are often fulfilled, though not exclusively, by religion.

Religious studies scholars have been analyzing the development of similar patterns of an increasing intertwining of the secular and religious. Religious studies theorist Robert Bellah explains how modernization in America led to the shift in sources of identity from the religious to other realms, such as economics or politics. More recent scholars, like Carole Cusack and David Chidester, have expanded this theory, arguing that this shift involves the inclusion of popular culture as a source of identity. This scholarship on popular culture and religion and science fiction and religion offers a valuable starting point for my research by acknowledging the ways that individuals are using narratives and objects that are not formally recognized as religious to fulfill a religious function and how religious practice can focus on secular objects. However, the criteria included in the aforementioned literature, which largely rely on modern replacements for elements of traditional religions, is limited when it comes to explicating what is happening for my interviewees at Dragon Con.

In contrast to this literature, my interviews were not focused on determining whether or not the interviewees understood their interest in science fiction as religious. Many of the interviewees identified themselves as part of a more traditional religious community. There were also interviewees, like David, who did not consider themselves to be religious at all. I discovered that individuals were not definitively replacing religious narratives with fictional ones, and neither were they solely participating in a new religion based on commodification. Where then, do these individuals fit in previous scholarship? My research suggests that they are taking experiences with science fiction and fantasy and integrating these newly-formed associations

into pre-existing webs of meaning in order to supplement previous belief systems. As a result, the development of individual identity is influenced by science fiction and fantasy narratives.

The interviews I conducted at Dragon Con revealed an area that has not been clearly defined in previous religious studies scholarship. It is understandable that this scholarship does not account for individuals like the interviewees at Dragon Con, because they inhabit a somewhat gray area within the religious marketplace. This area not addressed by contemporary theory concerning science fiction and religion has exploded as a result of the rapid growth of media technology in the last ten years, with individuals now having access to information and forms of entertainment that were previously nonexistent, or at least were in their rudimentary stages. Furthermore, the way fan conventions have grown parallel to new media has created a unique space for individuals to interact with these forms of entertainment in unprecedented ways. In the last three decades that Dragon Con has been in operation, the number of attendees has grown from 1,200 to approximately 70,000. Given this information, it is understandable that previous scholarship would not fully account for these newly developed fan cultures or the participants therein.

The model of the “fan object,” a component of fandom theory, provides the outline of an explanation for the nuanced ways in which individuals use science fiction to fulfill a religious function, especially how contemporary Americans utilize specific aspects of intertextual webs to identify value and to create manifold identities. Although previous scholarship highlighted an important moment in the incorporation of science fiction into Americans’ religious lives, the introduction of the fan object into the analysis of contemporary religion provides insight on a new example of religious individualism that seems to be a new step in the evolution of religion.

Hence, this thesis provides groundwork for future research on the intersection of contemporary mass media, science fiction, and religion.

## 2 METHOD

My research took place at Dragon Con, which is an entertainment convention that began in 1987 in Atlanta, GA. Growing every year since it began, Dragon Con 2015 reported an estimated 70,000 people in attendance from all over the world. The convention itself is spread across four hotels, with a fifth building reserved exclusively for vendors. The convention holds a certificate of acclamation from the mayor's office and each year a sizable amount of the convention's revenue is donated to charity. A major attraction for attendees of Dragon Con are the guests of honor—typically authors, artists, filmmakers, and celebrities—who make an appearance, usually to speak about their past and present projects and to sign autographs. However, this is only a small portion of Dragon Con. The convention boasts hundreds of panels, readings, film screenings, performances, parties, gaming tournaments, and a parade. It is not a stretch to say that there is something for every casual and committed science fiction, fantasy, or horror fan.

All of the events at Dragon Con are organized into various tracks—science fiction, fantasy, horror, and so on—for ease of access and navigation. For this research, I obtained permissions from Dragon Con's director of media relations and the Institutional Review Board of Georgia State University to conduct interviews with attendees of the convention, with a questionnaire and interview process likewise approved.<sup>2</sup> The majority of my time at the convention was spent on the lower floors of the Hyatt Regency Hotel, where panels and presentations about the sub-genre of Science Fiction Literature took place. I also spent a significant amount of time at the vendors' hall, as well as outside the room for general registration and ticket purchasing. My goal at

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix for institutional review board (IRB) permissions.

Dragon Con was to speak with individuals who expressed an interest in science fiction and have them explain in their own words, *why sci-fi*? Over the course of three days, I conducted interviews with twenty-one different individuals. Most of my interviews were conducted in the hallways outside of the panel rooms, or else in the lobby of the vendors' hall. I primarily spoke with interviewees on an individual basis, but I also conducted two group interviews. Individual interviews lasted approximately fifteen to twenty minutes, whereas group interviews took approximately twenty to thirty minutes.

Because of the limitations of my sample size, it was necessary to choose individuals of varying age, gender, and ethnicity in order to get a sample of Dragon Con's diverse demographics. I had a set questionnaire but the specific questions asked varied from person to person, depending on the direction of the interview.<sup>3</sup> Interviewees were asked to quantify their interest in science fiction and to describe why they find science fiction compelling. A portion of this included identifying certain works, whether it be movies, television, or books that the interviewees considered particularly interesting or impactful. The interviews also included questions about the appeal of Dragon Con as a convention and significant social connections formed through participation in science fiction fandoms.

With this goal in mind, I decided on a self-presentation that was somewhere between the elaborate costumes common at Dragon Con and a more distant, professional attire, and chose to wear a different "nerdy" t-shirt for each day of the convention. While this was my first time attending Dragon Con, I have a significant body of knowledge concerning science fiction, fantasy, animation, horror, and gaming. This knowledge and appearance helped me navigate some of the conversations I had with interviewees, as we were able to share some common

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<sup>3</sup> See appendix for questionnaire and interview instrument.

references. As a partial insider, interviewees were open enough to reveal to me a unique intersection between religious function and fandom that has only been cursorily addressed in previous literature.

### 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

As numerous scholars have argued, the connection between science fiction and religion relates to the decline of traditional religiosity and the proliferation of new types of media. This relationship is a complex web that requires interdisciplinary study. My research builds upon scholarship on these topics, as well as incorporates information on fandom, new religious movements, and intertextuality to describe how science fiction fulfills a religious function by contributing to meaning and identity development through the construction of fan objects.

In *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation*, Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge refute the idea that secularization is leading to a decline in religiosity. Rather, they state that although secularism is increasing in modern society, religion is not disappearing, but the sources of religiosity are changing.<sup>4</sup> As a result of this innovation, they argue, there is an increasing emergence of new religious movements.<sup>5</sup> My research examines the ways in which people are using primarily secular tools, namely works of science fiction, to fulfill religious functions. As Stark and Bainbridge suggests, this is at least partially due to an increase in secularization within modern society, which is in part responsible for the proliferation of various forms of entertainment and media that are not directly related to any one established religious group. What develops is an entirely new set of ideas, symbols, and associations that are being used to construct identity.

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<sup>4</sup> Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

In his work *Beyond Belief*, Robert Bellah describes the way in which meanings and identity associations can change as a result of modernization. He says that one of the primary characteristics of modernization is a new, positive mentality toward change, contrasted with the more traditional fear of change that is observed in pre-modern society.<sup>6</sup> The difficulty with this, as Bellah notes, is that there is often an inability to reconcile modern conceptions of change with any continuity of identity, as identity was most often tied to religion and religious symbols.<sup>7</sup> When change brought about by modernization in various forms—social, economic, and religious—occurs, identity symbols that previously had all of their meaning tied up in religiosity cannot necessarily retain the same significance and create the same sense of meaning for an individual.<sup>8</sup> The shift away from religious symbols as sources of identity directly results from what Stark and Bainbridge refer to as secularization, which may be considered one result of modernization.

While Bellah is speaking about modernization and changes in meaning primarily in reference to historical, large-scale social, political, and economic reform, his theories concerning symbols and identity, as well as the way in which these are in flux, can be applied to society today, on both a large and small scale. What Bellah describes is even more prevalent now because as the amount of information available to individuals increases, so too does the potential for new identity symbols. Dragon Con serves as a uniquely observable example of the magnitude of choices available, because it clearly includes, identifies, and categorizes much of the material that is being used in the construction of new identity symbols.

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66. <sup>6</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief; Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970),

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Although identity symbols are in flux, this does not necessarily create a negative situation for modern individuals. Rather, this loss or change in meaning opens up the possibility of creating new identity associations.<sup>9</sup> Individuals are choosing specific symbols that hold meaning for them and incorporating related ideals into their conceptions of themselves. Because of the nature of social interaction, even in the face of ever-prolific social media, the concept of meaning is individualized. Stark and Bainbridge expand upon this:

Societies are relatively closed systems of social exchange. Under some conditions, but not others, social exchange of symbols and explanations may lead to the establishment of a fairly coherent, shared culture unified by some small number of postulates. But a society's culture is often an incoherent aggregation of diverse symbols and explanations having only the most accidental relations to each other.<sup>10</sup>

It may seem counterintuitive to assert that there are no unified groups of meaning, especially in light of recent developments in social media and online communities, as well as the nature of fandom itself. However, Dragon Con facilitates the formation of smaller groups that develop meaning systems in relation to science fiction. On a larger scale, yes, the acknowledgement of value and meaning is present. Yet it is on a much smaller scale, perhaps even on an individual basis, that this acknowledgment begins to fulfill a religious function.

In *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah describes the concept of religious individualism. He uses the example of Shelia Larson, who defines her own private religious practice as “Sheliaism,” in which she picks and chooses which beliefs work for her and then incorporates them into her own religious worldview.<sup>11</sup> Bellah cites Shelia's ability to do so as a result of modernization and the expansion of what he calls the religious “marketplace.”<sup>12</sup> Bellah argues that such individualism is possible because the religious marketplace expanded as a result of changing religious ideals and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>11</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 222.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 227.



tastes.<sup>13</sup> Again, this is directly related to what Stark and Bainbridge observe as changing religiosity as a result of secularization. In a sense, this works in a cycle of supply and demand: tastes inform the marketplace, and an expanding market creates space for new tastes. The same phenomenon is occurring among those who gravitate toward science fiction in all of its various forms. Advances in communication and technology have opened up a new world of possibilities for entertainment, and this is becoming more readily available to more fans. Within this new world, these individuals are choosing specific “fan objects” (a term I will explain in greater detail later), and associate with certain fandoms because they suit their individualized interests. The model of “Sheliaism” can provide some insight into how the individuals I spoke with are using science fiction to fulfill a religious function by providing an example of how individuals are consciously selecting material that informs personal ideas and practices. Bellah’s “Sheliaism” relies heavily on the subject’s acknowledgement of the syncretic nature of her religiosity, and I did not find this to be the case with the interviewees at Dragon Con.

In addition to more individualized understandings of religion, like “Sheliaism,” other new religious movements emerge as a result of the changing religious marketplace and increasing individualism. In *Invented Religions* Carole Cusack identifies invented religions as those that “refused strategies of legitimization that were customarily employed by new religions.”<sup>14</sup> She says that participants within these religions acknowledge works of fiction as the foundation of their tradition.<sup>15</sup> She argues that these new religions should not be considered fake, but rather the logical result of the expanding religious marketplace and the countercultural response to previously established religions. In a sense, the resulting practices are not exceptional, but rather

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Carole Cusack, *Invented Religions Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010), 143.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 7.

the next step in the evolution of religion.<sup>16</sup> These “invented religions” develop as a direct result of increasing individualism and consumerism, and are primarily concerned with themes of self-transformation, imagination, and identity.<sup>17</sup> She says that invented religions creatively mingle fictional narratives, many from science fiction, and religious modes of thinking.<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that the fictional narratives in question necessarily “replicate conditions of traditional religious forms,”<sup>19</sup> according to Cusack, which in turn creates a space for competing religious narratives. Thus, these new narratives act as a replacement of those from more traditionally established religions.<sup>20</sup>

Cusack identifies science fiction as a primary source for several of the invented religions she examines. She argues that for the participants, these works of science fiction put forth ideologies that are applicable to their daily lives and in this way serve a religious function. I will demonstrate that this is also the case for many individuals participating in science fiction fandoms. However, there are some important distinctions to be made between these two groups. The first and most important difference is the focus of each respective type of group. For an individual who chooses to participate in an invented religion, self-identification as a member of a new religious movement is generally a central part of his or her experience.<sup>21</sup> For those who choose to participate in a fandom, the most important aspect is not necessarily identifying as part of that fandom, and certainly not as part of a religious tradition. Rather, the most important aspect is the appeal of something called the “fan object.”

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

The overarching structure and definition of fandom and the fan object are important to understand in order to describe what I see occurring at Dragon Con. *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*, edited by Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson, provides some of the foundational information about how fandoms come to exist and operate. Fandoms are a subset of a larger cultural phenomena called “participatory culture,”<sup>22</sup> which Henry Jenkins defines as:

being characterized by “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of information membership whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.” “A participatory culture,” they add, “is also one in which members believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connections with one another.”<sup>23</sup>

Fandoms then, are participatory cultures that are focused around fan objects.<sup>24</sup> Fan objects are the particular works that fan communities can center around, and are primarily read as texts because of the type of information they convey. However, fan objects are not confined to novels or other written items. Cornel Sandvoss describes this most clearly in his essay, “The Death of the Reader?,” where he says,

Whether a given fan object is found in a novel, a television program, or a popular icon, fan objects are read as texts on the level of the fan/reader. They all constitute a set of signs and symbols that fans encounter in their frames of representation and mediation, and from which they create meaning in the process of reading.<sup>25</sup>

As Sandvoss notes, a fan object can really be almost anything. However, a specific fan object is not confined to a single item. Rather, fan objects begin with an *urtext*, which is the original item, such as a novel.<sup>26</sup> The *urtext* is then grouped with the related paratexts, which are distinct but related texts, such as the movies, video games, and internet memes that are spawned

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<sup>22</sup> Aaron Alan Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson, ed., *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, ed., *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 22.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 23.

from the novel.<sup>27</sup> Many paratexts are created by fans of the urtext.<sup>28</sup> The fan object thus becomes the urtext, the paratexts, and all of the associations that accompany them. Sandvoss explains:

Fan objects thus form a *field of gravity*, which may or may not have an *urtext* in its epicenter, but which in any case corresponds with the fundamental meaning structure through which all these texts are read. The fan text is thus constituted through a multiplicity of textual elements; it is by definition intertextual and formed between and across text as defined at the point of production.<sup>29</sup>

In the case of science fiction and the fandoms that spring up around them, the fan object is the web of associations that surround a particular work. As Sandvoss notes, this web is understood in reference to the individual's own experiences, and because of this, there is an inherent intertextuality within fandom. It is this web of associations emerging from science fiction that allows individuals to identify meaningful moments, passages, and characters in multiple favorite works. Finally, because of the intertextual nature of fandom and the often complex web of associations that occurs as a result, the reasons for the incorporation of specific works into an individual's identity are not always clearly articulated by the individual.<sup>30</sup>

The complex webs of meaning and identity constructed around a fan object utilize narrative in a way that is notably different from the way Cusack describes in *Invented Religions*. Like Cusack's invented religions, these fan objects also center on narrative, and as a result, I identified many of the same themes Cusack examines, including self-transformation, imagination, and identity. As I stated, what Cusack describes are new religious movements that self-identify as such. However, the interviewees at Dragon Con often identified as part of a particular fandom and spoke of certain fan objects, with no implications of religious affiliation. The key difference is based in this dichotomy between self-identified new religious movements and fan objects that

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

have a religious function, and lies primarily in the way that these two groups are employing narrative.

For Cusack, invented religions take a cohesive, fictional narrative and use it as a replacement for other traditional religious narratives. There is a conscious choosing of one narrative over another, and it applies more broadly to the entire religion.<sup>31</sup> A central narrative is also at the heart of every fan object, but through a web of associations, including the paratexts and personal experiences of each individual, this narrative becomes fragmented and significantly individualized. Because there is no standard web of association or “field of gravity”<sup>32</sup> around any one fan object, it becomes difficult to establish a central narrative, particularly when individuals are not consciously seeking to do so. The result is that fan objects are not being used to replace narratives of particular belief systems, but rather serve as sources of supplementary material for identifying meaning and value. For the interviewees at Dragon Con, each particular fan object from science fiction functions religiously because the meaning or values expressed through the object are incorporated into the individual’s sense of identity.

The study of how science fiction fan objects function religiously relates to scholarship on religion and sci-fi and religion and popular culture more broadly. In *Authentic Fakes*, David Chidester examines the emergence of “fake” religions in American popular culture. He says that certain pop cultural phenomena, such as “the sport of baseball, the consumer product of Coca-Cola, and the musical genre of rock ‘n’ roll” function “as if they were religions.”<sup>33</sup> Chidester makes the complex argument that objects or concepts like these are “fake” religions because they are not actually religion, except for the fact that, he argues, *they function as religions*.<sup>34</sup> He thus

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<sup>31</sup> Carole Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Gray, *Fandom*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), viii.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

coins the phrase “authentic fakes” to describe how these elements of popular culture are “doing real religious work in forging a community, focusing desire, and facilitating exchange in ways that look just like religion.”<sup>35</sup> Chidester examines how these authentic fake religions function, looking at everything from celebrity worship to virtual religion. Chidester argues that they are often based on the commodification of specific consumer objects and the symbols that emerge from the acts of buying and selling. For this to be the case, the object and the distinctly American associations that come with it must be the focus of cultural exchange, and he cites Coca-Cola and McDonald’s as examples.<sup>36</sup> The end goal, he argues, is a missionary-style globalization of the products and the ideologies they represent. This serves a religious function, because it creates social cohesion around a central set of values embodied by commodities and consumerism, and creates a tangible focus for one’s ultimate desire or concern.<sup>37</sup>

Chidester shows that it is not only possible for pop culture objects to serve a religious purpose, but it’s actually becoming more commonplace. Unlike Cusack, he does not focus solely on groups that self-identify as religious, but rather examines how objects that are formally understood as secular can take on a religious role by providing a system of meaning and values. Because of this, much of his work provides a model that is applicable to my research concerning science fiction. Like Chidester’s authentic fakes, science fiction fan objects are not formally understood as religious and yet still fulfill religious functions.

However, fan objects and the material objects Chidester describes, while comparable, are not the same. The actual tangible material object is the focus of the authentic fake religions. So the material object is a singular, essential component. The fan object is a web of interrelated

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, ix.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

materials and associations, and cannot be reduced to a single thing. This is an important distinction, because for authentic fakes the symbolism and associations that follow the material object are often understood in the same way by a majority of people.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, a fan object that focuses around any particular urtext is highly individualized, and two fan objects may utilize the same urtext and include vastly different associations.

Considering Bellah's "Sheliamism," Cusack's invented religions, and Chidester's authentic fakes, I argue that science fiction fandoms fall somewhere in the middle of these in terms of religious functionality and emerges as something unique. The use of science fiction fan objects to fulfill a religious function emerges parallel to the development of syncretic religious individualism, invented religions, and authentic fakes and incorporates certain elements of each, but it also points to a new example of religious individualism that requires further examination.

#### **4 EVIDENCE AND EXAMPLES**

Previous scholarship on new religious movements and religion and popular culture can partially explain the religious function of science fiction fandoms. However, it is necessary to consider the model of the fan object in order to most accurately describe what is occurring among individuals at Dragon Con, as it most clearly situates these individuals and their practices within the larger religious landscape. In this section, I will use a few specific examples from interviews to show that the model of the fan object best explains what I observed at Dragon Con. First I will explain the way in which fan objects are unique to each individual, then I will describe how individuals can simultaneously have multiple fan objects. Finally, I will show how a fan object can be used to provide a source of identity and meaning.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 3.

The model of the fan object is a useful tool for examining how the interviewees at Dragon Con select and use works of science fiction. On the second day of the convention, I spoke with Adam,<sup>39</sup> a twenty-three year old Korean-American man in the lobby of the Marriott hotel. When asked for an example of his favorite work of science fiction, he immediately mentioned *Star Wars*, saying,

It's hard not to be impacted when you see these characters as role models. I mean, like, growing up my uncle showed me *Star Wars* for the first time, and watching Luke Skywalker go through the transformation from the young naïve farm boy to the hero of the universe, and it was a very humanistic character that was liable to fail. And he did fail, and you see him fail and make mistakes time and time again, and that kind of proves to me, personally, that it's okay that I fail and it's okay to continue to fail, as long as I'm willing to get up and stand up for what I believe in and fight for what I believe in. I don't think a lot of genres have that capacity to do that.<sup>40</sup>

According to Cusack, if *Star Wars* functions religiously for Adam, then the narrative of the films must be used to replace previous religious beliefs.<sup>41</sup> In her work on Jediism, she does an in-depth analysis of individuals for whom this is actually the case. During our interview, however, Adam identified himself as Catholic. While Adam is using some of the elements of the *Star Wars* films to describe the way he understands his own identity, that does not directly translate into having the films as the basis of his religious beliefs. What Adam describes is closer to Chidester's argument about material objects as a source of religious function, because what matters is not the identification with a specific tradition, but rather the source material, in this case *Star Wars*. Yet Chidester's theory does not precisely describe what is happening with Adam. In his theory *Star Wars* is a commodity, including viewing of the films and consumption of other media like merchandise, but the commodity is not the focus of Adam's experience. As a result, both of these

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<sup>39</sup>Pseudonyms were used for all interviewees; names begin with the first letter of the alphabet and move forward accordingly. This excludes published authors.

<sup>40</sup> Adam, personal communication, September 5, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Carole Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 25.



models offer only a partial explanation. The model of the fan object provides a useful middle-ground for explaining how Adam is using *Star Wars*.

For the sake of utility, consider *Star Wars* to be the fan object in question for Adam. The films serve as the urtext, and the paratexts are important for a thorough understanding of the fan object as whole. One important component of the fan object is the characterization of Luke Skywalker. Adam is working through his own experiences through his focus on the characterization of Luke. From this he is able to identify hard work and perseverance as personal values, which he reflexively incorporates into his understanding of himself. He directly related to the character of Luke Skywalker, and this created in him the desire to work harder and speak up for what he believed in. When asked about what he does for a living (he manages a sandwich shop), he told me that he has always been a workaholic, since he started working at age twelve. He attributes his rapid rise through the management ranks to his work ethic. I do not suggest that Adam's entire work ethic stems from one moment of admiration for Luke Skywalker. There are numerous other factors to consider. However, I do think it is significant that of all instances, Adam chose to mention this one in his interview. This recognition of desirable traits was significant, especially during his childhood, because it provided a model of the type of individual Adam wanted to be, which he further incorporated into his perception of himself.

Adam was also quick to mention that it was his uncle who had shown him the *Star Wars* movies. Earlier in our interview, Adam explained that he considers his uncle to be the man who raised him. As a result, he had a lot of respect and love for his uncle. His uncle passed away in 2008, and Adam said he often feels nostalgic for the activities they used to do together, including watching movies. While the character of Luke Skywalker is part of Adam's fan object, his connection of the films to his relationship with his uncle are also part of that same fan object.

With this portion of the fan object, the content of the *Star Wars* film is less important than the experiences he associates with it, yet the experience is directly tied to the urtext. In this way, the web of associations within any individual fan object becomes more complicated. This particular version of the fan object is unique to Adam, because while others may have *Star Wars* as an urtext, no one else shares Adam's specific experiences in relation to that urtext.

I found that most interviewees were able to give me particular instances in works of sci-fi or fantasy that resonated with them, without clearly articulated reasons. Many of these moments were scenarios that highlighted dynamics of human relationships. One interviewee in particular sticks out in my mind more than others, Becca, a graduate student studying English and Secondary Education. Our conversation veered away from science fiction when Becca started to describe her favorite book series, *Harry Potter*. I was concerned about the relevancy of our interview to my research, but then I realized that what Becca was telling me was not generally why she loved *Harry Potter*. She was trying to explain the impact of the novels by describing particular moments:

The third *Harry Potter* book with um, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. It's when Harry finds out that Sirius Black isn't...isn't this horrible criminal that killed his parents and everything, and Sirius is basically like, "Yo, come live with me when all this shit is taken care of." Like, it's gonna make me cry just thinking about it. But that, that part where Harry felt like he belonged and felt like he had a home and like actually felt loved and it was just like...feels, you know? I remember I had to put it down. Even when um, in the seventh book, when Percy, the older brother, has always just been a dick to his family. He...was pretty much anti everything that his family was doing and um, he finally came back to fight with the battle of Hogwarts and he finally came back to fight with them, and um, [crying] oh God...one of his brothers died, and it was just, it was a lot. And I remember thinking like, "Fuck."<sup>42</sup>

While all of the interviewees I spoke with were enthusiastic and animated, Becca was overcome with emotion when speaking about her favorite scenes in the *Harry Potter* series. At one point

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<sup>42</sup> Becca, personal communication, September 6, 2015.

while she was talking, she began to cry. Even though this recollection of a scene from the novels caused a significant emotional response, Becca never identified the narrative as replacing a previous religious ideology. In fact, she identified as Christian, and Southern Baptist, specifically. Yet, like Cusack describes within invented religions, the narrative of *Harry Potter* was extremely important and formative to Becca's worldview. She was talking about relationships, and familial relationships in particular. To Becca, it appeared that the scenarios she described served as symbols for how familial relationships should be, and as such they became quite meaningful and attractive to her as a reader. These instances served as a concrete example of the incredible appeal of strong familial relationships. In this way, *Harry Potter* serves to provide supplementary examples of previously established values, rather than establish a competing belief system. Here again, it becomes more appropriate to use the model of the fan object to describe Becca's commitment to *Harry Potter*.

Consider the *Harry Potter* novels as the urtext. Becca revealed during our interview that she had also seen all of the film adaptations and played some of the earlier videogames. Beyond that, she informed me that she had posted several quotations from the books all around her room, and she had a symbol from the books, the Deathly Hallows, tattooed on the back of her neck. All of these elements function as paratexts within Becca's particular formulation of the fan object, *Harry Potter*. One could argue that this is an example of Chidester's authentic fake religion that focuses on a material object and the related consumer culture, because it is focused on tangible products. However as I have demonstrated, Becca brings her personal experiences and values to the fan object; Becca grew up poor, but had close relationships with her siblings, much like the brothers she discusses. In many ways, Becca's experience parallels that of the impoverished

brothers, and thus it makes sense that she is able to identify with these particular characters and vividly imagine the tragedy they face when one sibling dies.

Interviewee Charlie a twenty-two year old woman, told me that many of her associations with science fiction are tied to memories of her family:

I grew up with *Star Wars*, like from a very young age I was shown *Star Wars* and shown *Star Trek* and all that stuff and you know, it's always been something so fascinating, and something that's always been so part of my life. Because I, I mean I feel like I've grown up in kind of a really geeky and nerdy household as well, so it's always been something my parents have, like, enforced too, so yeah.<sup>43</sup>

I asked her why science fiction was an area of interest for her, and she told me that some of her best memories were of watching and reading science fiction with her other family members. Those instances had a lasting effect and resulted in positive associations with science fiction. It is possible that by reading and watching her favorite sci-fi, Charlie is able to revisit those important moments and recreate them when engaging with her family in the present. Charlie mentions two urtexts: *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. Yet she groups the two together as components in the same field of relationships. This is an example of how, unlike the invented religions Cusack mentioned which tend to focus on one ideology in particular, multiple fan objects can be used at once to fulfill the same religious function. For Charlie, both *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* have positive associations based on her past experiences.

One interviewee, a twenty-nine year old high school literature teacher named David, perfectly demonstrated the way an individual can have multiple fan objects. First, David created three different costumes to wear over three days at Dragon Con. These costumes were of characters from varying forms of media, including the post-apocalyptic film *Mad Max*, the children's card game *Pokemon*, and a popular video game called *Fallout*. Each costume was

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<sup>43</sup> Charlie, personal communication, September 6, 2015.

chosen for a different reason, but David clearly explained the reasoning and story behind each in great detail and with enthusiasm that showed their importance. This is just a visual example of the way in which David had created multiple fan objects for himself.

David talked about several works of science fiction that he found meaningful, and one aspect he focused on was the ability to identify with the characters of a work. Specifically, David identifies as gay, and is drawn to works of science fiction that have positive portrayals of LGBT characters. He says, “The fact that they (sci-fi video games) are really inclusive of a lot of queer characters and bringing them into the storylines and not making them into just villains or just freaks, but that they’re just contributing members of whatever storyline is going on.”<sup>44</sup>

David also said that he enjoys the way science fiction portrays the world, both in the present and the future. From his answers, one can infer that the element of possibility is formative to his personal value system. Put another way, the ability to examine what “could be” is important. So important, in fact, that David passes this on to his students, making them read real news articles about subjects that would fall into the realm of science fiction: “In my classroom, I have an entire four and half, five week unit that is just called ‘The Changing World,’ and it’s all about nonfiction articles about science fiction topics and how those things are reality and not just made up stories.” All of these things offer material for the construction of David’s worldview and identity, based on a particular set of values. Though he may be unaware of it, he is mediating the relationships between several different fan objects, which provide important narratives, like Cusack suggests; unlike Cusack’s theory, they do not compete against one another but rather work in conjunction.

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<sup>44</sup> David, personal communication, September 5, 2015.

Fan objects are being used by the interviewees at Dragon Con to create personal identity. This was the case for the authors that spoke at a panel titled “The State of Black Sci-Fi,” which I attended as part of the Science Fiction Literature track. The panel was comprised of eight black sci-fi and speculative fiction authors. Before the panel began, I conducted a group interview with the authors and the subject of representation came up immediately. I found that many of the authors were particularly drawn to science fiction, both reading and writing, because they saw themselves represented there most often. The most memorable example of this came from a science fiction and fantasy author, Eliza, an African American woman in her fifties. She said, “Ever since I saw the first episode of *Star Trek* when I was maybe seven or eight and saw Uhura, I just wanted to be that person.”<sup>45</sup>

She gave this answer in response to my questions about why she was primarily drawn to science fiction, both as a reader and a writer. When I asked Eliza to elaborate, she said that it was the first time she remembered seeing someone who looked something like her in a prominent role. For Eliza, the urtext that she mentions is *Star Trek*, particularly in reference to the character Uhura. So, *Star Trek* is Eliza’s particular fan object in its most foundational and elementary form. However, this is not the only element that contributes to the construction of the fan object. Eliza told me that she got her start writing fan fiction, before moving on to other forms of writing. Fanfiction operates as a paratext in relation to the urtext of *Star Trek*. Similarly, any *Star Trek* related fan forums, discourse, and conventions (like Dragon Con) that Eliza has participated in contribute to this fan object. In addition, Eliza brings her own experiences as an African American woman to bear on her interaction with the fan object. What emerges is a complex web of associations around the original urtext of *Star Trek*. From this, Eliza is able to decide what

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<sup>45</sup> Eliza, personal communication, September 4, 2015.

elements of the fan object resonate most clearly with her, in this case it is being able to identify with one of the main characters. For Eliza, this recognition was significant enough to spark a life-long interest in science fiction.

L.M Davis<sup>46</sup> is another African-American author who served as a panelist on the Black Science Fiction session. L.M., a thirty-six year old woman, cited science fiction as providing a space of inclusion for minority characters. For her, science fiction provides that space in a way that other genres do not:

When we're talking about mainstream fiction, when we're talking about the stories that can be told and the stories that are often told and the space that sci-fi and fantasy offered for someone like Octavia Butler to remember a different kind of history, if you will. One where women of color were central. It's this idea of otherness, but it's also this idea of we carve out these...it's more intuitive to carve out spaces for people who otherwise wouldn't have spaces in the kinds of stories that get the most attention.<sup>47</sup>

L.M. mentions the work of Octavia Butler, and in this instance, the foundational part of the fan object is Butler's written work. However, L.M. focuses on the author herself, and the way in which Butler creates a space for women of color to be the protagonist, regardless of specific plot points. This acknowledgement of the significance of Octavia Butler's identity work is part of the web of associations that emerges around the urtext(s). Like Eliza, what L.M. identifies as significant is the ability to recognize herself in a particular work. For both Eliza and L.M., the ability to see themselves as black women represented in science fiction literature is one of the primary appeals of the genre. This is true of being able to see that type of representation in works of other authors, as well as being given the space to create those kinds of characters for themselves.

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<sup>46</sup> L.M. Davis is a published author; her pen name is being used.

<sup>47</sup> Letitia Carelock, Gerald Coleman, L.M. Davis, Milton Davis, Edward Hall, Alan Jones, and Balogun Ojetade, personal communication, September 4, 2015.

Following the logic of Cusack and Chidester, the interviewees at Dragon Con are definitely using science fiction to do religious work. On the other hand, these examples do not fit into the same forms as these scholars described, but the similarities between these groups are too significant to dismiss. Much like Cusack's invented religions, these narratives focus on themes of self-transformation, imagination, and identity. They also create social cohesion, focus desire, and facilitate exchange, with events like Dragon Con emerging as a result; these are all characteristics of religion cited by Chidester. The model of the fan object works to give a more detailed explanation of how and why these science fiction fandoms are able to function religiously, and points to new developments within the larger religious landscape.

## 5 ANALYSIS

The interviews at Dragon Con demonstrate that the religious marketplace is expanding beyond even the bounds of what Stark and Bainbridge defined as "religion."<sup>48</sup> The incorporation of traditionally non-religious narratives into the religious landscape is a clear example of the shift in symbols that Robert Bellah describes as occurring as a result of modernization. Alongside and in relation to the religious marketplace, there has also been an expansion of the entertainment "marketplace," which is also a product of modernization. The choices of entertainment, both subjects and sources, are virtually endless. Through an increase in media and communication technology, information is being shared by more people faster than ever. Events like Dragon Con, which attracts roughly 50–70,000 people a year, exist now across industrialized nations because the marketplace has created a demand for such a space. Modernization produces a new,

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<sup>48</sup>Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge. 5. Stark and Bainbridge suggest that "religions involve some conception of a supernatural being, world, or force, and the notion that the supernatural is active, that events and conditions here on earth are influenced by the supernatural."



more positive attitude toward change, change that moves society away from older forms of religiosity because the symbols once associated with religion have lost their meaning.<sup>49</sup> These religious symbols were once also key in individual identity formation, but once the meaning of these symbols shifted, the door was opened for individuals to look elsewhere for their identity.<sup>50</sup>

The process of modernization includes the development of new technology, media, transportation, and the proliferation of information sources. With this, modernization legitimizes new modes of thinking and considerations of value. Individuals who attend conventions like Dragon Con are taking in more information about religion and entertainment simultaneously, and forming webs of reference through intertextuality. Additionally, entertainment is taking on a more significant role, as individuals involve themselves in certain fandoms and devote more resources, both intellectual and economic, to their interests. Fandom, for some, becomes an important part of identity. As a result, elements from popular culture are functioning in a religious capacity, because individuals are pulling information from specific works of fiction and using these pieces to help them identify certain values and construct personal identity. For example, Adam uses *Star Wars* source material for identifying admirable characteristics, such as being persistent and hard working. Becca, who uses scenarios in *Harry Potter* to identify desirable family dynamics provides another example. For these individuals, science fiction helps them to articulate what they find meaningful through the use of examples. Interviewee David looks for complex and multi-faceted representation of queer characters within a work, in order to reaffirm and celebrate important aspects of his identity. Authors like Eliza and L.M. go a step further, inspired by their own fan objects to create and expand the literary representation for people of color.

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<sup>49</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief*, 67.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

The model of the fan object provides an alternative to previous models of the relationship between religion and popular culture put forth in the scholarship of Cusack and Chidester. Although what Cusack and Chidester describe as invented religions and authentic fakes, respectively, are important and useful examples of new forms of religiosity, these models do not consider what is occurring among individuals like the interviewees at Dragon Con, where a religious function is being fulfilled, but without the element of identification or the pointed focus of one particular material object. The model of the fan object can include both of these elements, and the fan object as a source of religiosity provides a more expansive view of a complex web of associations that make up value systems and identity.

For one, the fan object model does not rely on the premise that one must self-identify as religious, and it allows for a greater focus on individual experience. Each fan object is uniquely tailored to the individual engaging with it, which is fundamentally different from the new religious movements described by both Cusack and Chidester, which rely on identification with a particular group. Here again is an echo of Bellah's Sheliaism, but unlike Shelia Larson, the interviewees do not acknowledge the syncretic nature of their value systems. Unlike what both Cusack and Bellah describe, these individuals do not necessarily understand their use of science fiction as religious. This is due in large part to the use of the fan object as the source of religious function, not religious organization.

The intertextual nature of fan objects facilitates the incorporation and relation of multiple objects to one another. This is different from the invented religions that Cusack describes, wherein an individual is actively choosing one specific ideology over another. The fan object, then, does not serve as a way to replace certain religious systems, but rather a way to supplement or reaffirm already established beliefs. Early on, I stated that fan objects are used to create values

and identity. To clarify, individuals “create” by using fan objects to assemble a bricolage of various examples that help to articulate more difficult concepts of meaning, which are in turn incorporated into an individual’s identity.

While the model of the fan object has been a key element of fan studies and scholarship on participatory culture for the past several decades, this is a new concept for religious studies. By incorporating this into the way religious studies scholars interpret religion, in all of its varying forms and definitions, it is possible to provide insight on a relatively new example of religious individualism that seems to be the next logical step in what Cusack calls the evolution of religion, beyond Sheliaism and conceptions of religion as invented or authentic fakes.

## 6 CONCLUSION

I have demonstrated the way in which religious studies could benefit from the incorporation of the model of the fan object as a tool for studying the development of new forms of religiosity, specifically the use of science fiction to fulfill a religious function. The individuals at Dragon Con are using elements from science fiction to create value systems and construct identity through fan objects. Each fan object is unique to an individual, and individuals engage with multiple fan objects at once to create a web of associations that incorporate media, material, and experience.

This introduction and application of the fan object model provides a foundation for further research into the changing relationship between media, popular culture, and religion. First, the range of individuals could be expanded outside of the science fiction genre to determine how this sort of personal development around a fan object is happening in other areas such as horror, fantasy, or popular literature. I could investigate the choices being made

concerning fan objects, including why some works are more appealing than others, to a variety of intersections of age, race, gender, sexuality, and class. On a larger scale, this study suggests further research into the idea of self-identification and religiosity. Research might reveal how individuals engage with multiple fan objects and intertwine other means of identification such as traditional religion, politics, and social issues. The fan object by nature lends itself to a sorting or editing process. This would open questions of how contemporary subjects reconcile and maintain the various aspects of personal identity by separating out those aspects they find more appealing from those they do not. Together, these research agendas would examine how contemporary mediated culture produces nuanced and individualized forms of religiosity that attempt to incorporate some or all of these elements.

There has already been a wealth of scholarship as well as popular writing done on the importance of understanding culture, particularly popular culture, as a means of understanding the human experience; my research suggests that as forms of media and popular culture continue to transform, sources of religious function take on new and exciting forms as well. As such, it is necessary to find new ways of considering religiosity that begin to describe these new forms. Like the trajectory Cusack describes, we see religiosity going through a process of evolution; the result is not a straight line, but rather a web of constantly changing forms of religious expression. The changing and expanding religious marketplace can no longer be solely attributed to modernization or secularization, but rather it must be understood as an observable example of the possibilities of human creativity and imagination.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### *A.1 Institutional Review Board Permissions Letter*

##### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Mail: P.O. Box 3999  
Atlanta, Georgia 30302-3999  
Phone: 404/413-3500  
Fax: 404/413-3504

In Person: Dahlberg Hall  
30 Courtland St, Suite 217

August 27, 2015



Principal Investigator: Brett J Esaki

Key Personnel: Cooper, Lauren M; Esaki, Brett J; McClymond, Kathryn

Study Department: GSU - Georgia State University, GSU - Dept. of Religious Studies

Study Title: Finding Meaning and Identity in Works of Science Fiction

Review Type: Expedited 6, 7

IRB Number: H15548

Reference Number: 333681

Approval Date: 08/27/2015

Expiration Date: 08/26/2016

The Georgia State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the above referenced study in accordance with 45 CFR 46.111. The IRB has reviewed and approved the study and any informed consent forms, recruitment materials, and other research materials that are marked as approved in the application. The approval period is listed above. Research that has been approved by the IRB may be subject to further appropriate review and approval or disapproval by officials of the Institution.

Federal regulations require researchers to follow specific procedures in a timely manner. For the protection of all concerned, the IRB calls your attention to the following obligations that you have as Principal Investigator of this study.

1. For any changes to the study (except to protect the safety of participants), an Amendment Application must be submitted to the IRB. The Amendment Application must be reviewed and approved before any changes can take place

2. Any unanticipated/adverse events or problems occurring as a result of participation in this study must be reported immediately to the IRB using the Unanticipated/Adverse Event Form.
3. Principal investigators are responsible for ensuring that informed consent is properly documented in accordance with 45 CFR 46.116.
  - The Informed Consent Form (ICF) used must be the one reviewed and approved by the IRB with the approval dates stamped on each page.
4. For any research that is conducted beyond the approval period, a Renewal Application must be submitted at least 30 days prior to the expiration date. The Renewal Application must be approved by the IRB before the expiration date else automatic termination of this study will occur. If the study expires, all research activities associated with the study must cease and a new application must be approved before any work can continue.
5. When the study is completed, a Study Closure Report must be submitted to the IRB.

All of the above referenced forms are available online at <http://protocol.gsu.edu>. Please do not hesitate to contact the Office of Research Integrity (404-413-3500) if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



Cynthia A. Hoffner, IRB Vice-Chair

**Appendix B*****B.1 Interviewee Background Information Sheet*****Background Information (Optional)**

Name

Age

Gender

Race

Education Level

Occupation

Religious affiliations past/present

Hometown/Location

Are you willing to answer follow up questions?

**Contact info**

Phone:

Email:



## ***B.2 Interviewee Questionnaire***

### Background Information

1. Are you interested in science fiction?

### Entertainment

1. On average, how much time per week would you say you devote to your interest in science fiction?
2. Which form of media are you primarily interested in? (books, movies, games, etc)
3. What are some of your favorite books (movies/shows)?

### Science Fiction-Specific

1. Do you find science fiction compelling?
2. If so, why/how so?

### Identity

1. Do you work in a field related to your interests?
2. Do you consider yourself a member of a particular fandom/community (or more than one)?
3. If someone not part of the fandom asked about your involvement, would you be comfortable sharing this information?
4. Is your fandom/cultural identity generally separate from your day-to-day life OR would you consider the two to be integrated?

### Worldview (if interviewee demonstrates significance)

1. On a scale of 1-5, with one being the lowest and five the highest, how would you rate the impact of [insert appropriate item-scifi, fantasy, etc] on the way you see the world?
2. Have you ever had a memorable reaction to a particular work?
3. How would you explain what you get out of science fiction?

### Religion (may be asked as a follow-up)

1. How would you define “religion” or “religious?”
2. Do you consider yourself to be a religious person?

### Community

1. Why did you attend today’s convention?
2. Do you think it is important to have a certain body of knowledge to participate in events such as this convention?
3. Have you made any important or significant social connections through your involvement in a particular fandom?